

I'm Judie Wayman. Today we are interviewing Henry Miller, a Holocaust survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. When we left at the end of the last reel, we were getting into what you were doing in the service, your work.

When we built, the Czechoslovakian army, we built by the zone there, by the German zone and the Czechoslovakia zone. We built such a bunker, they called it. They shoot. When they come, when they attack, they going to attack the Czechoslovakian, then you could shoot them from those bunkers, you know.

So anyway, it didn't came to that because the politic from the world, from Chamberlain, from those politics, they gave over the whole Czechoslovakian for the Germans, without fighting the Czechoslovakian. So I was in Czechoslovakia in the army in Brno when the Germans came in. 5 o'clock in the morning, we heard the radio said hello, hello. This is the president from the Czechoslovak. The name was Hacha.

Masaryk was dead already. And Benes was went away to Russian, the other president. So Hacha, they took over. I announcing the German army comes in to help us, just they're not going to stay too long. They're going to go out, and they're going to occupy the little bit Czechoslovakian. Then they're going to go back. Everybody should go back to work if he works on the field.

I heard that, like, now. Everybody should go back to work where he worked yesterday or before. Nothing will happen to nobody. They come just to help us.

In the morning, came already the Germans to the kaserne, where we the soldiers used to be. A big officer from the Czechoslovakia opened the door for them. The Germans came with the tanks, with the motorcycles. There was a motorcycle, and right away with the pistolet and everything.

So we have to put down the-- we shouldn't fight. We should put down--

Weapons?

--the weapons. Thank you for helping.

I do it myself all the time.

The weapons we shouldn't touch. I was there and I remember very good. Was one Czech boy, he took the weapon, he broke it, and he started to cry.

He said to the officers there, you sold the Czechoslovakia my father was fighting for Czechoslovakia. And you sold it to the Germans. Right away they took him away, you know. I don't know what's happened with him.

So anyway, then we still was there about four weeks, about a month or more. Then they gave me a passport, a book to go home where I belong. I went home. Was in 1939.

And by us was the Hungarians. And the Carpathian came in from the other side when the Germans went into [NON-ENGLISH], went into Czechoslovakia, and the other side went in the Hungarian. Was Hitler told them, you know, I go here and I give you this. You know?

Because they was together, the Hungarian government with the German government. They worked together-- and the Italian government. I went home already. This was a Hungarian by us.

Then in 1940, they took me away for work. They called it work, to Poland, to Russian. The Jewish boys had a yellow armband, a yellow. The Germans knew this is the Hungarian Jews. We went for work there.

Then they took me, all of a sudden, I saw myself, I'm in Kyiv, a Russian, White Russian. Not myself, it was I don't

know how many, a few thousand. We worked there under the Germans, for the Germans, under the Hungarian. The Hungarian soldiers, they gave us the order what to do by the German.

Then they took us in the other side, Kyiv. Then it was Donetsk. We went and we made wood. I don't know how to say it.

So we worked there. I was there till 1943 when the offensive came from the Russian side. The Germans went back in 1943, was it? The Germans went back. They took us, too, with them. The Hungarians took us with them.

Those time, I could have stayed in Kyiv. The Ukrainian people was very-- we gave them food. We had over there what to eat because we was like soldiers, just with armbands.

I helped them a lot. I knew the partisans was going on. They told me was there a family. They told me everything. Because they was afraid to talk, just they told me. I knew it and another few friends.

They begged me, Henry, stay here. Don't go home. I'm going to support you. You're going to have-- because look over there in Kyiv what they did with the Jews, the Germans.

Then was already in Davydkov. Not Davydkov. Was there when they was lot of Jews, they murdered them and they buried them by Kyiv. I was there in the cemetery.

Babi Yar?

Babi Yar, I was there.

We're going to go back to this a little later. Let me backtrack.

Just tell you what-- OK.

We'll go back to that.

OK. I'll make myself a note on that one.

Yeah.

OK. When you first came home then, the first in--

'39.

--'39?

When you heard the announcement over the TV, over the radio, that was the first you really knew about the war. You were building the bunkers just in case.

Yeah, in case the Germans is going to come. Yeah.

But that was the first time you were aware that there really was a war?

I knew it before, when we stopped back in '38. The Czechoslovak gave over the Sudetenland. They called the Sudetenland.

They said they're not going to come further. They're going to stay there. So we went, moved back from the bunkers. We moved back. We left them for them. That was the order.

Did you think that was going to work?

Yes. I was so dumb. I thought it's going to work.

Trusting.

Trusting. I was together with the Germans. We put in here will be the zone for Germany and here for the Czechoslovak. I trusted them.

They told me there the wood will not be rotten yet, what the Germans going to take away the whole thing. That's no use to put there. I trusted. I was believing this couldn't be why they should took away, you know.

So anyway, that was in 1938, when the Sudetenland they took over. In 1939, they came in already over the whole Czechoslovakia.

Was there a change, then, in the way the non-Jews acted toward you? You said you went home. You were told there that your family would be all right. But could you see changes in the way that non-Jews acted toward your family or towards other Jews?

Yes, it was changed. They started already to say who is not a Hungarian citizen. Was about 10 families they took away to Poland and they never came back.

Were there any overt acts of anti-Semitism?

Started already.

What sort of things did you start seeing?

Let's say, for instance, even this. They took away the 10 families from us. Then they started everybody should have the Hungarian citizenship. They started took away the businesses from the Jews.

Then they started already to-- let me see. When they started to put in a yellow--

Star?

--a star, I think, a year later. They started already the Jews had to wear a yellow star. This was already in 1944 when I came-- in 1943, when I came back from Russia, when I was around there for my work, then they started already.

The people asked me don't go home. Pretty soon, not too long, the Germans will be so and so. I thought, I'm not in the German. I'm from the Hungarian. They're not going to touch us.

When you were going home for leaves during this time, and right afterwards, did non-Jews, did they try to help when they saw some of these changes starting, later on, that you were talking about, too? Did any of the non-Jews try to help?

To help what, you mean?

To help the Jews, to prevent-- well, with businesses, or if they were in danger, their property, anything like that?

Everybody was already afraid. Everybody wants to keep themselves, you know? What could they help each other?

We couldn't help. I couldn't help you. You couldn't help me.

I was protect my family. I tried to protect them. You tried to protect your family.

Just you was talking. It's no good. Something must happen. That's no good.

One guy, I was very good friend with him, he listened to the radio. He said, Henry, the war-- this was already yet in 1940. He says the war will be till four years, he said. I heard in the news, he said, from England.

I didn't believe it. Could be four years, a war. Will be sooner over. They're not going to touch us. That's what was in my mind.

When I came home, when the Germans moved back from Russia in '43, I came home with them. I got under the Hungarian orders. They let me home. I got a passport.

There was a law who was two years of work under the Germans there and there in Russian, they have a right to go home to their parents. So I went home-- let me see exactly. Before Pesach, 1944, in March, I came home. In April, started the ghetto, in '44.

What changes were there? When you went home, how had what had been going on up to that time, the war and the things around the war, besides just the fighting, how had it affected your family?

Was affected. We couldn't buy already what we needed it. They took away the businesses.

First they said, if you are citizen, they're not going to touch you. So I tried and my parents tried we should get citizen papers, Hungarian citizen papers. Because my parents was born there. Everything, the background, we are from there. We could.

I had it. The Hungarian said. I thought nobody's going to touch us. That's what was the-- everybody tried to get papers, citizen papers. Not only we, all Jews.

So cost us a lot of money, everybody. I'm talking about all the Jews. So we had it, the citizen papers.

So everybody thought this is it. They're not going to touch us. The war will be soon over. We're going to be free again.

Or this was different. They took away. Cost us a lot of money, everybody. We had the citizen papers. Didn't help.

How is your family surviving without the business, then?

We had corn, let's say, from the field. We had potatoes. We had still the cow with milk.

So I worked a little bit, tailoring, with a Christian. He paid me. I could buy it off black market, let's say, from them, bread in the stores.

The Jewish people didn't have a store anymore. They took away, '44. Even before, they took away the stores.

All Christians was changed already. Sure was changed. They thought this is it.

They're going to take away from the Jews. They're going to be rich. They're going to have everything, the Hungarians.

Was changed already from the neighbors also, from everybody was changed. Because everybody thought they're going to take away, like I said, and they're going to be rich. The Jews has to do what they going to say.

They didn't said it right away, you know, and openly. They was feeling that way. They was feeling.

In April was Pesach. We made our Pesach. It was already a little bit different. After Pesach, they made the ghetto. Right away, they made the ghetto.

They made the ghetto by us. They brought in from the little towns to us people. So still we thought, nobody believed it, that they're going to take us away.

Because you see, this was taken away people from the little towns. They took it to Hungarian. To not Budapest, to Miskolc, another place, was the name.

There they said, the Hungarians said who is closer to the Russian zone? They took away Jews because we Jewish people, they don't believe in us, that we are not trusted. That there, we are not trusted for them. That's why they took us away. Still we didn't see no Germans in the Carpath, only the Hungarian worked with us, no Germans at all.

So people was riding from there what they took away before from the little towns. We thought, OK, we're going to survive over there. They wrote letters from there. They are in Hungarian, still in Hungarian, not in the camps.

Just they took us because they don't trust us. So they don't trust us, we're going to make there a little bit till the war is going to be over. We're coming back home.

What was the name of this area where you were taken?

Not Miskolc. Oh, I will give you the name exactly.

OK.

I forgot now.

Was everyone from the town then taken to the same place?

Not from our town, from the little towns around us. From my town was still there everybody.

Oh, you still stayed then?

Still stayed.

In the ghetto.

In the ghettos. Yeah. Then in May, Shavuos was June, I think, Shavuos.

Then came they took us also over there, you know. We didn't know camps or Auschwitz. We didn't know. They took us over there.

Did you have to stay there the whole time? Were you able to leave?

Let me tell you, I could have leave. I could run away.

Could you go?

Could people leave there to go to work and come back.

No.

You went through there, you had to stay?

No. You stayed there. Just I could have go. At night, I could have go away because I know all of the streets where to go, how to go, you know. I could have go.

What do the people in the ghetto do to support themselves? About how many people were there at that time?

There was a few ghettos, not only of a few places.

But the one where you were staying, your family was.

500 in the houses, in the ghettos. We were there.

What happened to the other people from your town? You said there were about 2,000 Jews earlier?

Everybody had different ghettos.

Oh, they just split you all up?

Yeah. Yeah.

Were there people from other areas also in the ghetto where you were?

Yes.

Where were where were some of these people from?

From where? Sapinka, because by us was the zone, the other side was Romania. At those time, the same thing came into Hungarian to them, went to us. Was one already. Hungarian, they called it.

So came in a lot of them from the little town. They brought them in to us, to the ghettos. Afterwards, they packed us in the wagons, what I call it, with a train, like, you know. And they took us away to Birkenau, Auschwitz.

How long were you in the ghetto, then, altogether?

In ghetto, four, five weeks, six weeks.

Was there a Judenrat there?

No Judenrat, no, no. By us was no Judenrat. Just let's say, for instance, like I say, it was no Germans. We didn't see Germans at all. Only the Hungarians worked with us.

How did the Hungarians treat the people?

Very bad, those time already bad. Then came in special police. They call this, in Hungarian, tabori [HUNGARIAN]. They treat us already very bad in the ghettos.

What did they do?

I heard they raped a few girls. They raped a few girls in the ghetto, yeah. I know even which ones.

Before you were talking about when you were still in service in Kyiv.

Yes.

During the time you were in Kyiv. You were telling me about Babi Yar. Let's go back to that now.

Yes. I was in Kyiv. I got a lot of friends here, even now what we work together in Cleveland. I saw Babi Yar. I was there.

How long afterwards was this, or was this before?

In 1943?

OK.

In 1943 was it.

Mhm.

In Babi Yar. Was there a family, like I said, were a very good family. They trusted me and my friend. We gave her food. They took for the partisans, you know.

They told me, look. They're killing all the Jews, the Germans. By us was no German, like, no Germans at all. I didn't believe it.

You know, how a Jew is. If they didn't bother me, I don't believe. If they bother you, they won't bother me. That's the truth.

I was so blind, like I say. I was there in Babi Yar. I was in Russian and Kyiv.

What did you see?

They told me here is a thousand, hundred people was shoot down. When I saw it on television, I remind myself then. The Germans, only the Germans, the Germans, by us was no Germans. And I hated to leave my parents.

People, partisans, you said, wanted you to stay, that you had contact with them.

No. Those people I was in contact with, I could have go with the partisans in Kyiv. Yes, I told myself what? I'm young. What, I'm going to? I'm not afraid for my life.

I had in my mind always the parents, and my wife, my girlfriend, you know? I'm not afraid for my life. You're young, 22, 23-year-old. Well, the whole world is yours, you know.

So you decided to go home when you could.

Yeah. So we went home. That was the ghetto, like I said.

What sort of things were you doing while you were there?

Where?

In Kyiv area.

In Kyiv area? We worked by-- we gave food for the Germans. Food, let's say, I was under the Hungarian. They had all kind of food, salami, sugar, product, all kinds, what the soldiers need. The Hungarian, the Germans came with a list what they want. We gave him that.

I was working there. I gave them, let's say, they said give me a sack. They had black and white papers, sugar, jam, or salami, or pork. This kind of work I work, myself, and here I got a few friends what they worked. The rest of them worked of different kind of places in Kyiv.

Who are you working for?

For the Hungarians.

OK. I just wanted to make sure I had that right.

Yeah, for the Hungarians. See, the Hungarians gave for the Germans. It was together, you know.

OK. When did you have the time to come home?

They took us home in 1944, when the Russian came closer, closer. They moved. The Germans run away, run away. I was under the Hungarian order, you know?

So they took us back to Hungarian, they gave me a passport, and they let us go home. This was an order from the Hungarian. Who was two years on Russian soil, they have a right to go home. I'm talking for the work. So I went home. Because I was always under the order from the Hungarian.

At this point, did you still believe-- what did you think of the war situation, then?

I still was believe it because we are not under the Germans. I believe it because we are not under the Germans, we're going to survive.

How many people were living at your home now? You had some of your brothers and sisters had left.

Now, or those time?

When you came back then, after you left Russia and came back.

Those time, my brother was in Israel already, like I said. The other brother, the next, for mine oldest brother, he was married. He was living in Kosice.

So the rest, we was home. We were home, four minus one. The oldest sister was married in '40. She was married in '40. Then we was the four sisters and three brothers were home by mine parents.

OK. Then what happened? You said you went to Birkenau. What happened?

Yes, the oldest sister lived in another town from us. See, let me tell you. We are so believed when they took from the other town those people, like I said to-- I forgot the name, it's not in-- I will give you that name.

Don't worry.

My neighbor, a Christian, he was by the railroad. He left in the trains. I don't know how to call it in English, you know.

He told us, because he knew where my sister lived, he says tonight will come from that little town the train. They take to the rest, the Jews, over there, not Auschwitz. My father begged him. Hey, listen, take off my daughter from the train. She has a little boy. Take them off.

So at night came the train. He went from one wagon to the other one. He called her the name and he took her off and gave her to us. I mean, he brought it home to my parents.

So her husband was already at work someplace. Not at work tailoring or other work, with the Hungarians, of another work. I was in Kyiv. He was someplace else. You know what I mean?

Mine sister was with us. He took her off that night. I want just tell you we was good friends with the neighbors.



So when they took us away, Erev Shavuot in 1944, then they put us in the wagons. When I saw already Bohemian where we going, then the train passed the Polish territory, then I saw it's no good. I couldn't help it.

Till Kosice, we didn't see-- I forgot to tell you-- we didn't see no Germans by us, only the Hungarians. When we came, we passed the train at Kosice. We were there a few hours.

Then I heard the hollering from the Germans. Then I saw already the Germans. That night I heard them. Then they took us to Birkenau.

Even though you didn't anticipate any problems prior to this time, were any of your neighbors or anyone there aware of what might-- thinking of what might happen, have any kind of resistance planned?

From the neighbors? You see, they didn't show that, the neighbors, that they are bad. Just by them, they was inside. That's good thing. When they take away the Jews now, we're going to be in top on the world.

But the Jews themselves, did they plan any sort of resistance? Or had they thought of anything to do in case?

No. It was already too late. It was too late. Till the last minute, we didn't believe it, this could happen to us because we didn't see no Germans by us, no Germans at all.

What did the neighbors do when they found that things were not going to be quite as good as they thought they'd be when they took over? Did they do anything [INAUDIBLE]?

They pulled them away. I'm afraid. They said, I'm afraid already. Even if we gave over to the neighbor, we had our window from our house to the neighbors. We gave him a lot of things to hide it, to hiding.

Then they gave it back. They said, I'm afraid. I'm afraid. So and so, it's not allowed. It was already nobody should take from Jews something. It's not allowed. They was afraid that they was hiding, we shouldn't see them.

But I don't know. They was happy we going, they took us away? Sure, they was happy.

They were happy. They was ashamed, too, we should see them. You know what I mean?

What is your health like at this time?

Health? Mine health, thank God, I was the strongest man. I had no problem with mine health. Even now, thank God, I never have no problem.

At that time, about how much did you weigh, when you went to Birkenau?

Yeah, let me see. That time I weigh 75 kilo. That's 45 [INAUDIBLE] 150, 160, 150 pounds, 160, young, 23, 24-year-old. I had everything what I needed it. You know?

What happened at Birkenau?

In Birkenau, when we came already to Birkenau, I saw it's no good. Somebody told me, because in Birkenau was a lot of Jewish people. The most Jewish people who take-- they call them the Kanada.

They took us. We came in there. They took us out from the wagons.

I heard one said let the little children go with the older parents. Let them go with older parents, because that's no good. So I told to my sister, you know what, my sister had already a kid, 2 years, 2 and 1/2 years.

Say you know what, Rose? Give it to mother, the child. And you go with other sisters together. I'm going to see you.

They put us, the men separate and the woman separate, to five to a--

Yeah. I was with two brothers and my father. He was a strong man. So we were four together with myself. We went in a line where we going to work. The strongest, they picked up the strongest and all. My father was with me, with my two brothers.

How long were you in the cattle cars?

In the cattle cars, the cattle cars call us. You're right. See, I say the wagons, the cattle cars.

I just thought of it.

That's right. I was in the cattle cars, let's say, 8 hours, 10 hours, that's all.

How crowded was it? What was it like?

Oh, yeah, crowded was already, very close one to each other. Was crowded, that's no question.

About how many people were in there, would you guess?

Oh, what can I-- 50, 60.

All ages?

All ages, all ages. Well, the cattle cars, when they put us in Toco, my little town, the cattle car even, my wife was always with us together with mine sisters. We was always all together.

Exactly but one, mine father was in the next cattle car for my mother and for mine sisters, so on. Exactly, they cut off, and said you go here. Then when we came at one time in Birkenau, we were all together again, by when the cattle cars came in.

What did you do in the cars?

What could I do? Nothing, nothing. I was already, those time I saw, that's no good.

Did the people talk to each other? Or what did you do to pass the time? Right.

Yeah. One Jew I remember, a neighbor, he start to cry. He says now they're going to slaughter us. Now, when he saw we're going over to Polish from the Czech land, from Czech to Polish, then he says now it's no good. They're going to kill us.

Everybody should say viddui. You know what that means, viddui? Before you die, let's say, I say viddui, for God, or forgiveness, this and that. He says everybody should say viddui, because they're going to kill us. I didn't believe it yet.

How about the other people? What were they saying or doing?

Nothing. Start to davening, start to cry, you know. It's no question about it. When we came in the morning, in the morning around 9 o'clock, we was in Birkenau, let's say.

Then I said to my sisters, they should keep together wherever they go. Go and work, they should be together. My wife, also, my wife has other two sisters with her.

So they all went in one bunch together, one each other, till five was and a cousin, too, cousins, too. I was with my father and two more brothers, were four went to work because we were strong, like I say. My father was a strong man. Then

they took us to Birkenau.

When we went, when they took us already from the cattle--

Cattle cars?

--they took us to Birkenau, to five, and the Germans was behind us with the guns. We was schlepping, still yet, a piece of bread. The people was crying in the ditches they was working, our Jewish people, give me, throw down the bread.

Because you're not going to have it. They take it away from you. Give us.

We thought they are crazy. We didn't believe it. So in an hour or two hours later, we were the same way, like they are.

Then they took us to Birkenau. We went in for a shower. You went in with this door. You put here the clothes. You thought you coming back. You're going to take them. You never came back this way.

You went in here. You go out there. Everything behind, was there the bread, whatever you had. They gave you a pants and a jacket-- not a pants, those stripes, like pajamas. That's all you had.

Then they took you. Then they gave you a haircut, everybody. They put you in Birkenau in those concentration camps. We saw already that's no good.

Who were you with at this point, who in your family?

In the family, my father and two brothers and two uncles. We were together.

What had happened to your sisters and your mother?

My mother, she was in the gas chamber right away from when they took us in the camp, and they took them in the gas chamber.

With the baby?

With the baby from my sister. My sister went with mine other sisters and work.

Next day in mine camp, where I was, was there people from the little towns. They worked-- they called it the Sonderkommando, they called it. When they took from the wagons to the gas chamber, after there was the gas chambers, the people, they throw them in the crematorium in the ovens.

One man told me, I knew him from the home, I mean not from my own town, the neighbor's town, he said Henry, this and this happen. Don't believe we going to go out alive from here. Everybody should say a prayer Kaddish.

I say you're crazy. He says, you see those chimneys? Over there was, let me see, four crematoriums in Birkenau. I'm talking Birkenau. I'm working there, he says. I know what's going on.

So what could I do? What could I do? That's what that was.

My father was still with us. Then they put us the names, they tattoo your names, you know? Mine was 10,368. My father was 69, my older brother, 70, one of each other.

We had here the numbers, 10,386 A. This means a Hungarian. See? Each other. My grandson tells me, Zaide, that's so dirty.

So that's what it is.

When did you find out what had happened to your mother?

A few days later. I wasn't a dummy and I was a dummy.

If I let they should took us over there, I was blind.

I'm sorry.

No, nothing to apologize for. Let's come back to this and build up a different way. What happened to you after you were taken, you and your father and your brothers? What did you do for those first few days?

We took us to work.

We made hay. We cutted the grass, you know? We made hay. We knew that work, and we went there every day.

Where were you living there?

In camp in Birkenau.

What was the barracks like where you were living?

The barracks, I think was number 18.

The next was-- I don't know exactly-- they called it the [INAUDIBLE]. Mine sisters was there in the next-- I saw them. We saw them from far away. When I came home after the work, they was still waiting.

We'll come back to this a little later on here, then.

Do you want to talk about what it was like with the other prisoners, how the prisoners got along together?

Everybody was the same. Everybody tried to steal a piece of bread from the other one.

How much food did you actually get?

Oh, just a soup and a small piece of bread.

Did you have services or any social relationships there?

No, not at all. When we came home from work, we went to see the sisters from far away.

And how long were you at Birkenau?

Till end October.

OK. We're going to break again now, and we'll be continuing in a little bit.